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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 001821

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SUBJECT: DRAMA IN AGADIR: RECAPING THE POW RELEASE

REF: RABAT 1776 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) The two US charter aircraft carrying the final 404 Moroccan POWs held by the Polisario touched down at Agadir Airport shortly after 7:30 pm local time on August 18. Arrayed at the bottom of the stairs to greet the POWs as they came off the aircraft were Foreign Minister Benaissa, Minister of Interior Mustapha Sahel, Deputy Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri, Moroccan Royal Armed Forces General Bennani, Senator Lugar, and Ambassador Riley. This was an unprecedented line-up for returning POWs; in the past, POWs had been flown to the military airport in Agadir, offloaded in perfunctory manner, and driven directly to the barracks in Agadir for processing. They were released to their families 2-3 weeks later and were accustomed to fading away into Moroccan society with no fanfare.

2. (SBU) Sporting new track suits, most of them red and green (Morocco's colors), and freshly shaven, the POWs descended the stairs one by one, each man carrying one or two small duffel bags. They shook hands with the Moroccan officials, who welcomed them somberly, and then with the two beaming Americans before being directed to large tourist buses lined up near the tarmac. Ambassador noted that most of the men avoided eye contact with their greeters, perhaps reflecting their years of subservience as prisoners.

3. (C) The Moroccans had done their best throughout the organization of the Lugar mission to keep the event low-key, but their best laid plans came to naught on the tarmac in Agadir. Throughout the afternoon, prior to the arrival of Senator Lugar and the POWs, Embassy officers had wrangled with airport officials and their superiors to allow Moroccan and international press to have access to the tarmac. Authorization was granted and revoked several times over the course of the afternoon; at one point, emboffs started to set up a podium and lay down a carpet on the approximate site where the charter planes would park, only to be ordered off the tarmac by the regional military commander, who only an hour earlier had granted authorization for the move. "There has been a change," he said without elaborating.

4. (C) The leaking of the Lugar mission in the international press more than 24 hours before his arrival created intense interest in the mission in Morocco, and ultimately enhanced media coverage. By the afternoon of August 18, some 40 journalists and cameramen had congregated outside Agadir Airport (even while the embassy had invited many Moroccan journalists to a formal press conference in Tetouan the following day). Shortly before 6 pm, airport officials agreed to provide the journalists with badges so they could enter the airport, but on condition that they be corralled in one of the departure lounges. The authorities instructed us that Senator Lugar was free to come to the lounge to address the press, but the journalists would not be allowed onto the tarmac.

5. (C) There was not a sufficient security presence to carry out that directive, however, and as soon as Senator Lugar's aircraft landed at approximately 7:00 PM, a number of the journalists walked unrestrained toward his plane to take pictures. Though they could not get physically close to the Senator, or to the Moroccan officials and Ambassador Riley who went out to receive the Senator, they could film his arrival without obstruction.

6. (C) The scene at the VIP lounge, however, where the Senator, Ambassador, and Moroccan ministers gathered to await the arrival of the POW plane, was more chaotic. The embassy had granted requests to four prominent TV stations -- RTM and 2M from Morocco, Al-Jazeera, and al-Hurra -- for short, exclusive interviews with Senator Lugar. Once on the ground and realizing there was some time before the POWs arrived, Lugar's staff suggested the Senator begin his interviews right away. As the four lucky TV crews were summoned to the VIP lounge, other members of the press corps surged forward and had to be restrained by a combination of Moroccan security and embassy PAS officers. As Senator Lugar prepared to start his first interview in one corner of the VIP lounge, emboffs grabbed the PAS FSN slated to oversee the interviews and pulled him into the VIP lounge, away from agitated members of the press corps demanding access to the site, and

Moroccan security closed the door firmly behind him.

17. (C) As the first POW plane touched down around 7:30 PM, Lugar and the Ambassador got up to head out to the aircraft to greet the arrivals. The four Moroccan officials departed also, and all assembled planeside. The Moroccans had staged the offloading on a distant runway, and all of the buses to ferry the prisoners to the barracks were concealed behind a wall of high trees. But by this time news of what was happening had circulated all over the airport, and airport personnel and all of the journalists from the pen, along with dozens of security officials, had gathered on the tarmac. A crowd of roughly 150 people was now on hand.

18. (C) Security officials attempted to keep the press corps from approaching the POWs directly, but several cameramen eluded them and got next to the stairs before being hustled away. The security officials eventually locked hands to form a semi-circular "cordon sanitaire" around the area to keep the press at bay, but newsmen were still plenty close to collect footage and capture the moment.

19. (C) The POWs looked weary and somewhat disbelieving as the door of the aircraft opened and they filed down the stairs. There were no shouts or raised fists or waving. Most of them probably had little idea who was greeting them at the bottom of the stairs -- with the exception of Senator Lugar, whom they may have seen on the Tindouf side. The airport staff who had come out to witness the proceedings were riveted and displayed visible emotion. Most of the men exited on their own, but a few descended on crutches or with assistance, and several were placed directly into wheelchairs.

110. (C) One prisoner broke the mold, however: when his feet touched the tarmac, he pitched forward and fell to his knees, kissing the ground and crying out in anguished relief. The press swarmed around him. Another man excitedly shook Senator Lugar's hand and in heavily accented English exclaimed, "Thank you!" and "Viva George Bush."

111. (U) When the first plane was empty, Senator Lugar returned to the VIP Lounge. Completing his last interviews, he swept out to the podium, and under bright lights (it was now dark), read his prepared statement to the press and departed.

112. (U) Senator Lugar was wheels up from Agadir at approximately 8 PM.

RILEY